

Suggested Remarks
Gerry A. Porta
"Books for Asia" Turnover Ceremony
Folk Arts Theater, Kaamulan, Capitol Grounds
Malaybalay City, Bukidnon
August 1, 2007, 10:00 a.m.

Honorable Robert Jose Zubiri, Governor of
the Province of Bukidnon;

Honorable Florencio Flores, Mayor of
Malaybalay City;

Dr. Steven Rood, Country Representative, The
Asia Foundation;

Parents, Teachers, and Students;

Distinguished Guests, Friends, Ladies and

Gentlemen:

Maayong Buntag. Magandang umaga po as ating
lahat.

I am honored to participate today in this
book turnover ceremony. It celebrates our
partnership and affirms our mutual

commitment to improving educational opportunities for children and young scholars here in Malaybalay City and in the province of Bukidnon.

When I visited Bukidnon for the first time in the early 1990s, I had the wonderful opportunity to climb Mt. Kitanglad. Since then, I have admired the rugged beauty and natural richness of your province, and have always longed to come back. I can still remember the cool mist, the scent of pines, and the dazzling array of wild orchids growing on huge tree trunks. Bukidnon is indeed the "highland paradise in the heart of Mindanao."

The history of U.S. Government support for education in the Philippines actually dates back more than 100 years, to the early 20th century, when American volunteer school teachers, who came to be known as "Thomasites," arrived in Manila to help establish the public school system of the Philippines. Today's ceremonial turnover of books affirms and continues the long tradition of cooperation among Americans, residents here in Mindanao, and all Filipinos to ensure that children and young scholars have access to education.

The Asia Foundation's "Books for Asia" Program has made a particularly important contribution in this regard, helping to put 25,000 books into the hands of students and

others in some 800 educational institutions here in Malaybalay City and the province of Bukidnon. USAID's Education Quality and Access for Learning and Livelihood Skills (EQuALLS) Program also has mounted a significant effort to bring books to students throughout the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), as well as Regions IX and XII. Together, these programs supported by the American people have brought more than 1.1 million books to Mindanao since 2003.

USAID supports the "Books for Mindanao" component of the "Books for Asia" Program and the EQuALLS Project because we recognize the great need for educational materials here in Mindanao. By providing a full range

of books and other reading materials for all levels of students -- from elementary school students to those attending university -- these programs provide students with the most essential tools to learn. "Books for Asia" and EQUALS help strengthen learning and reading skills, particularly English. And fairly or not, English fluency is especially important to be able to compete effectively in today's global economy.

Of course, education is about more than improving living standards. It is also about equipping people with the skills to be good citizens - to be able to work constructively with others to forge free, just, and democratic societies, which form the basis for lasting peace. A foundation

for peace has already been established here in Mindanao, but there is still work to be done. Stronger social and political institutions must be created to help sustain and nurture peace and ensure the equitable distribution of the benefits of economic progress. These strong institutions can emerge only through the efforts of committed and responsible citizens, and here too education is central.

In the areas of democratic participation, institution building, and governance, Malaybalay City is making impressive gains. In this connection, I want to take a moment to mention another aspect of the partnership between the American people and Malaybalay - and that is through our work under the

Transparent and Accountable Governance (TAG) Project. With the steadfast commitment to reform of Mayor Flores and his city government staff and the TAG Project's help, Malaybalay City has made great strides in improving governance and democratic participation. Under TAG, the record shows that Malaybalay has been a leader in improving city government services, reducing corruption, and mobilizing the business and NGO communities to participate in the reform process.

To cite just one example, Malaybalay City sought, with TAG technical assistance, to improve its business permit and licensing system in 2006. A study conducted by the Ateneo de Davao in January 2007 showed that

Malabalay now has the shortest processing time for registering businesses and securing a mayor's permit-taking just under one hour—of all 16 TAG cities in Mindanao. That is an amazing accomplishment!

We commend your progress, admire your commitment and are very proud to work in partnership with you.

USAID is also very pleased to be partners with The Asia Foundation in both the TAG and Books for Mindanao programs, along with the publishers in the United States who have generously donated their books, with local governments, and with the schools, teachers, and parent-teacher associations at the grass roots.

Finally, I thank Mayor Flores, and his staff for graciously hosting this important event today. The U.S. Government and the American people are proud to work with committed local governments, like Malaybalay City and the province of Bukidnon, schools and communities across Mindanao to help give children the education that they need and deserve.

Maraming salamat po at mabuhay tayong lahat.